

SCOPING NOTICE

RED DESERT VEGETATION MANAGEMENT ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

The Red Desert Vegetation Management analysis area is located approximately 6 miles north of Duck Creek Village, on National Forest lands in the Cedar City Ranger District of the Dixie National Forest in Iron County, Utah. The legal description is T37S, R8W, Sections 2,17,20-22,27,28,32,33.

Surveys have found widespread conifer invasion of aspen stands (a natural seral process) with a diminishing amount of young aspen in this area. Regeneration of aspen will help balance age classes for habitat and vegetative diversity. Regeneration will also help insure that aspen is present for the long-term. Aspen provides valuable wildlife habitat, and aesthetic visual qualities.

The Forest Service has conducted a preliminary environmental analysis of the project area to define proposed treatments to meet resource objectives. The proposed treatments are described below. A thorough analysis will be conducted in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. The analysis will disclose the project's foreseeable environmental effects for consideration in determining whether or not to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

Vegetation treatments in the area are needed for several resource purposes as stated below:

Aspen Regeneration.

Purpose: Stimulate aspen regeneration in stands with viable clones and reduce conifer encroachment into aspen stands. This includes treating aspen to promote aspen sprouting and root suckering and deter conifer encroachment by harvest or mechanical treatments.

Need: Due to widespread conifer invasion of aspen stands (a natural seral process), there is a diminishing amount of young aspen in this area. Regeneration of this aspen area will help balance age classes for habitat and vegetative diversity. Regeneration will also help insure that aspen is present for the long-term. Aspen provides good wildlife habitat and aesthetic visual qualities.

Prescribed Burning.

Purpose: Reduce the density of woody species and woody biomass to provide for vegetative diversity, ecosystem health and reduced threat of future fire.

Need. Fire tolerant species are favored and encouraged in mixed-species stands to maintain forest ecosystem health and decrease occurrence of high intensity wildfire that would damage soils as well as facilities. Aspen, a short-lived fire-adapted species, is regenerated through periodic fire disturbance. Aspen in the analysis area is currently succumbing to conifer, gradually eliminating the aspen component.

Since fire has been excluded from the ecosystem, conifer species have become old and decadent, leading to susceptibility to beetle epidemic. Historically, the aspen and conifer stands were maintained by frequent low intensity fires and infrequent high-intensity fires, reducing surface fuels, ladder fuels and stand densities to help maintain forest ecosystem health. The need remains to remove biomass or forest fuels.

Habitat Improvement.

Purpose: The purpose is to treat aspen and existing decadent mixed conifer stands to improve seral (age class) variety and structure. The existing stands are old and at risk of insect infestation or disease.

Need: Regeneration of aspen will help balance age classes for habitat. There is also need in the project area to maintain vigorous mixed conifer timbered areas for wildlife habitat. Maintaining stand vigor and health will help insure that the stands are healthy and present for the long-term.

PROPOSED ACTION

The Proposed Action (Alternative 1) consists of three actions:

Aspen regeneration (200 acres). Within the 397-acre aspen stand, 40-acre areas will be treated, totalling approximately 200 acres regenerated. Regeneration will be accomplished by harvesting decadent aspen clones to promote suckering. Both saw timber and non-saw timber will be (1) removed as commercial products or biomass, or (2) piled and burned. Regeneration will be by mechanically cutting aspen with the following elements:

- Fell all aspen trees with DBH 2" or larger.
- Fell all conifer trees.
- Machine pile and burn slash greater than 6" diameter and 8' long, leaving approximately 3-5 tons per acre.
- At large pile sites, the topsoil will be scraped aside prior to piling, then returned over the site after burning.

Prescribed burning (2,025 acres).

Prescribe burn aspen stands to promote aspen regeneration. Prescribe burn decadent conifer stands to help maintain fire-tolerant species and reduce ground and ladder fuels. Fire should be low-medium intensity burn covering 40-70% of the area in a mosaic pattern. Burning period will be late fall (Sept-Nov).

No active ignitions will take place in the fire contingency areas. Fire in those areas will be suppressed or allowed to burn depending on conditions and burning objectives.

Temporary road construction. The existing transportation network of forest roads developed for past projects in the area provides substantial access for this project. No permanent roads will be constructed. Approximately 1.0 mile of temporary road will be constructed. This road will be decommissioned at the end of the project.

POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES

Two or more alternatives will be considered in the analysis:

- No Action. Under this alternative the existing vegetation would remain in place. The existing conditions in aspen stands would continue. This alternative will be fully evaluated and described.
- Proposed Action (as described above).
- Additional Alternatives - Additional alternatives may be developed in response to issues and resource conditions evaluated through the analysis.

CONSISTENCY WITH FOREST PLAN DIRECTION

All resource plans are required to be consistent with the Dixie National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) approved in 1986 (16 U.S.C. 1604 (i)). The Forest Plan guides all natural resource management activities and provides the overall guidance for management activities by specifying goals and objectives, desired future conditions, management direction and standards and guidelines. All administrative activities affecting the National Forest must be based on the Forest Plan. Treatment areas are within the following Management Areas:

Management Area 1 (General Forest Direction).

Management Area 2A (Semi-Primitive Recreation). The general management area direction includes "Visual resources are managed so that management activities are not evident or remain visually subordinate...Design and implement management activities to provide a visually appealing landscape."

Management Area 7A (Wood Production and Utilization). In MA 7A management direction states "Management emphasis is on wood fiber production".

The Proposed Action for the Red Desert Vegetation Management project will tier directly to the Forest Plan FEIS. The Proposed Action has been designed for consistency with the goals, objectives, standards and guidelines of the Forest Plan.

Responsible Official. The responsible official for this analysis and decision is the Cedar City District Ranger, Dixie National Forest, 1789 N. Wedgewood Lane, Cedar City, UT 84721.

Decision To Be Made. The Responsible Official will decide whether to implement the Proposed Action as described, a modification thereof, another alternative or no action. The final decision is expected to be made by September 30, 2010.

Scoping Process. Individuals, organizations, federal, state, and local agencies who are interested in or affected by the decision are invited to participate in the scoping process. Comments received will be used in the preparation of the environmental analysis.

Comments Requested. Comments will continue to be received and considered throughout the analysis process. Comments received in response to scoping including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record of this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered.

Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied; the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within a specified number of days.

ADDRESS: Written or faxed comments are welcomed. Send written comments to: Red Desert Vegetation Management Environmental Analysis Coordinator, Attn: David Swank, Dixie National Forest, 1789 N. Wedgewood, Cedar City, Utah 84721. Fax comments to David Swank, Dixie National Forest @ 865-3291.